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*Minimize the chances  
of human misjudgment*

## COMMANDERS AND SURPRISE

Robert W. Williams

*Forewarned, forearmed; to be prepared is half the victory.*

Miguel de Cervantes

The outbreak of hostilities in the Middle East on 6 October 1973 once again pointed out our vulnerability to surprise. We should have been forewarned, but reactions to intelligence indicators were uneven. True, the Middle East situation was unique, but so were each of the previous situations in which the early warning apparatus of the United States failed to put it all together. Much has been said and written about the problems of early warning, both strategic and tactical. Considerable sums of money have been spent to improve intelligence collection systems and to expedite communications. Yet we remain today just as vulnerable to surprise as we ever were. Perhaps we have overemphasized the mechanical aspects of early warning and have failed adequately to cope with the human problems involved. A study of some of the more significant situations since 1940 in which the United States Government or military components thereof have been surprised by foreign initiative reveals a startling fact: *the surprise in each case was largely due to failure properly to evaluate information at hand*. Examples from which this conclusion are drawn are: Pearl Harbor, the German Ardennes counteroffensive, the North Korean attack against South Korea in 1950, the Chinese intervention in Korea, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the magnitude of the North Vietnamese/Viet Cong Tet offensive of 1968, and the October 1973 Middle East war.

You might logically ask; whose fault was it that the information at hand was not properly evaluated? Was it the intelligence people or the commanders (or civilian decision makers)? The answer is that both were at fault in varying degrees.

Thus, a recurring problem of serious proportions has been identified, and what to do about it is far from clear. One thing is certain: it will not be resolved of its own accord. Recognizing human frailties and weaknesses is one thing; changing them is something else. We can make inroads against the problem if we first admit there is a problem and then take steps to minimize the chances of human misjudgment and miscalculation.

I would like to offer some positive suggestions—not from the point of view of an authority, for there are none on this subject—but from the point of view of a military professional who is acquainted with the various fields of intelligence. These suggestions are not limited to the Army and they are applicable at both strategic and tactical levels of command. They are

**Surprise**

addressed primarily to commanders (and civilian decision makers), for they, in the final analysis, bear the heavy responsibility in cases of surprise attack. It is they who should determine the type of intelligence support they receive. And to this end it is they who should influence the shape of the intelligence system.

To commanders (and future commanders) I would then say:

1. *Identify loudly and clearly your intelligence requirements.* Too many commanders simply accept what the intelligence system produces. Others go to the extreme of allowing their intelligence officers to list minutiae. Somewhere in between is the happy hunting ground which can be found only by the professional commander who trains himself to know what he wants—and, within reason, insists on getting it. Do not permit your staff officers to decide for you what critical information you need. You need to be involved in the mental processes associated with determining and then stating essential elements of information. You can do this while working behind a desk, while on field exercises, or even while taking a shower. Once you are thrust into a crisis situation, it is too late to practice.

2. *Insist on receiving factual information assembled in usable form.* Do not make the mistake of overrelying on some intelligence officer's estimative abilities or even his ability to interpret facts. The intelligence officer can help you tremendously in coordinating the total intelligence collection effort, in sifting out pertinent facts keyed to your requirements, and in collating them with related information and displaying them in a form you can work with. Beyond that, the intelligence officer treads on dangerous ground. He has no magical qualities of divination. He cannot predict. The government does not issue him a crystal ball and, even if he had one, he would probably be less qualified than you to explore its secrets. Do not throttle your intelligence officer's initiative; simply drive him in the right direction.

3. *As a corollary to 2 above, do not count solely on your principal intelligence officer to provide you with early warning.* If he does so, fine. But do not depend solely upon him for this type of agonizing appraisal. There is rarely a consensus among intelligence personnel as to the implications of factual information. The intelligence staff officer is under duress to please the commander and is anxious not to be outdone by the operations officer. He has difficulty being objective and too often succumbs to the CYA approach. He should be ready to express an opinion or prepare an estimate when asked, but if you count solely on him for interpretation of facts you are almost certain to be surprised. I believe it is important for each commander and decisionmaker to have multiple sources of information in addition to his regularly constituted single point of staff intelligence coordination.

This principle of multiple sources applies equally at the national and tactical command levels. For example, the President would make a mistake to depend solely on the Director of Central Intelligence—or any other single source—for early warning. A certain amount of competition in the analysis and production of intelligence is healthy and necessary and should be encouraged rather than stamped out in the name of avoiding "duplication of effort" as has been the trend in recent years. Overcentralization of intelligence production is just as dangerous as over decentralization. "Bigness does not

**Surprise**

"beget quality" is entirely applicable to intelligence. Its truth was reconfirmed by the 1973 surprise Arab attack in the Mideast when the significance of available information eluded much of the U.S. intelligence system.

Tactical commanders have many opportunities to deal with multiple sources of information. First, the commander should talk directly to intelligence analysts from time to time about their particular spheres of interest. He is thus exposed to factual information which might not otherwise make its way through the staff bureaucracy. Also, the commander, on his visits to higher and subordinate headquarters, should make a practice of talking to the local intelligence officer. He should also talk face to face with prisoners of war and defectors. And of course he should have an open door policy toward all intelligence agencies operating in his area. These measures should not be interpreted as a lack of confidence in his principal intelligence officer; rather, they show him that the commander cares.

*4. Hold yourself—not your intelligence officer—responsible if you are surprised.* For years intelligence people have been made scapegoats when commanders were surprised. This is a cop-out by commanders who hold themselves responsible for virtually everything but interpreting information. Whenever a military catastrophe occurs you will hear cries of "intelligence failure." No mention is made of the commander who was too busy to involve himself in the intelligence effort or perhaps the commander who simply did not believe the information put before him

*5. Resist being over-influenced by the "prevailing climate of opinion."* Once you succumb to this phenomenon, you will tend to reject information which conflicts with it. History is replete with examples of dangerously inaccurate conclusions becoming widely accepted in advance of the facts. One of the findings of the Joint Congressional Committee which investigated the Pearl Harbor attack was:

"The consideration overshadowing all others in the minds of the Hawaiian commanders was the belief and the conviction that Pearl Harbor would not be attacked . . . It explains the reason for no effective steps being taken to meet the Japanese raiders on the morning of December 7th."<sup>1</sup>

Robert E. Merriam, writing of the Battle of the Bulge in *Dark December*, said:

"We were fooled because we were overconfident and certain that we had the Germans on the run. Intelligence officers, who were supposed to be born pessimists, were vying with each other for the honor of devastating the German war machine with words. It was a dangerous game, and the cost was high."<sup>2</sup>

One of history's more flagrant examples of the danger of preconceived opinions related to the surprise achieved by the Chinese in Korea in November 1951 against MacArthur's forces. The prevailing climate of opinion, largely created by MacArthur himself, was that the Chinese would not intervene. This prejudgment permeated the councils of government in Washington as well as subordinate elements of the United Nations Command. Factual information

**Surprise**

which conflicted with this theory was rejected. In retrospect, one cannot help being incredulous about the following sequence of events assembled by H. A. DeWeerd in a RAND Corporation report titled "Strategic Surprise in Korea War," June 1962:

- In late September (1951) our government received a Chinese warning through the good offices of the Indian government saying if UN forces crossed the 38th parallel, Chinese Communist forces would intervene.
- On 3 October 1951 the Chinese Foreign Minister assured the Indian Ambassador that if United States or United Nations troops other than South Koreans crossed the 38th parallel, China would send troops to the Korean frontier "to defend Korea."
- The above warnings were discussed at the Wake Island conference on 15 October where MacArthur is reported to have said to President Truman that Chinese intervention was no longer likely.
- On 20 October the first Chinese Communist prisoner was reported.
- On 26 October, what the then Army Chief of Staff, General J. Lawton Collins, called the "first real brush" with Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) took place.
- By 4 November, thirty-five Chinese Communist prisoners had been captured and seven separate divisions identified.
- On 24 November 1951 MacArthur launched his ill-fated drive to the Yalu.
- On 28 November, MacArthur reported in a special communiqué to the United Nations that ". . . a major segment of the Chinese continental armed forces in army corps and divisional organization of an aggregate strength of over 200,000 men is now arrayed against the United Nations forces in North Korea. . . . Consequently, we face an entirely new war . . ."
- During the MacArthur hearings, Senator Saltonstall commented to Dean Acheson, Secretary of State: "They (the Chinese) really fooled us when it comes right down to it, didn't they?" Mr. Acheson said: "Yes, sir."<sup>3</sup>

Detente with the Soviet Union and the reestablishment of formal relations with the Peoples Republic of China have tended to create an atmosphere of blissful detachment in some segments of our society. Writing on the possibility of a nuclear attack by the Soviets on the PRC, Joe Alsop stated on 5 September 1973: "We have reached a strange pass when such an increased possibility of nuclear war attracts no interest whatever in the United States."<sup>4</sup>

It is this euphoric, self-deluding climate of opinion which must be resisted by commanders and other decisionmakers. Deal with facts, not preconceived ideas which float down from higher headquarters or which work their way up from grass roots levels or which are fostered by less responsible segments of the press. We would rarely be surprised if this approach of letting facts speak for themselves was taken at each level of authority.

**Surprise**

6. *Assume (and honestly try to believe) that your opponent is as smart as you.* If you are a typical hard-driving, ambitious, courageous and well-educated U.S. military leader, you will find this statement easier to admire than to accept. The statement is not new; I have heard it often but rarely have I seen it taken seriously. Yet I am persuaded that it is fundamental to the state of mind a commander must be in to avoid a letdown. In my observation, this important philosophy was "more honored in the breach than the observance" in Vietnam where our commanders pursued the NVN/VC forces in something of a "cat and mouse" game, and suffered some bloody noses in the process. We found our opponents there to be shrewd and capable, accomplishing wonders with limited resources against seemingly overwhelming odds. It would be unfair to say less about them. In that particular environment, so difficult for conventional military forces, we would have been wiser to assume that our opponents were smarter than we, that they were not some lower order of peasantry who merely represented elusive targets. Had we done so, we might have been surprised less frequently.

Perhaps we miss this point in some of our peacetime training, particularly in controlled field exercises. We are all accustomed to the Blue forces (good guys) suffering a temporary setback at the hands of Orange forces (bad guys), then regrouping and delivering a devastating blow to the bad guys. Blue triumphs; that is part of the scenario, just as the police will win by the end of your favorite police TV show. There is nothing really wrong with such a scenario, until we repeat it so often that we begin to view any Orange force as a "punching bag." On the battlefield where life and death are at stake, there are no "punching bags"—only opponents as smart as we are, or smarter.

7. *As a corollary to 6 above, recognize that your opponent, being at least as smart as you, always has a plan.* Not only does he have a plan, he intends to win. His objectives might be incomprehensible to us, but they are very real to him and his plan is designed to achieve those objectives. Many Americans had trouble comprehending that during the late 1960's the principal objective of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong was to "get the Americans out of Vietnam." Whereas many of our commanders measured success on the battlefield, the opponents moved relentlessly toward their objective with perhaps the most skillful combination of military and political maneuvers ever employed on so vast a scale by a small country.

In the dark December of 1944, because our estimates showed the Germans with a limited remaining military capability, we forgot the fact that they too could have a plan, we forgot that they still intended to achieve some objective other than their own systematic destruction. We were surprised by the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes on 16 December 1944 and paid heavily for it with over 77,000 dead, wounded, and captured.

Somehow we must eliminate the popular concept that seems to emerge from our schools and our field training that the enemy is little more than a temporary impediment located between us and our objective. One solution would be to impress on our military professionals that the enemy are real people, as smart as we, who always have a plan.

**Surprise**

8. Your ultimate intelligence goal should always be to determine your opponent's plan (*intentions*). This may surprise you, for we have historically shied away from dealing with intentions and have stuck to enemy capabilities. But we continue to be surprised. Clearly, our present approach is not working. One major reason it is not is because we tend to think of intentions in terms of what *we believe* the enemy will do rather than in terms of what *he says* he intends to do. There is a difference of 180 degrees in the two approaches. When your opponent tells you his intentions, the information is either true or false. Your problem then is to determine which it is. You have a 50-50 chance, cold turkey. If you know your enemy and have a "feel of the battle area" your chances of being right mount. In any event, you are better off assessing the validity of what your enemy says he intends to do than assessing what your intelligence officer thinks the enemy intends to do. The former reduces your risks; the latter increases them.

Of course you will rarely have a complete statement of intent by your opponent—you might have to work with much less—but the opportunities for acquiring such information are increasing as the world shrinks and as intelligence techniques improve. If you do not acquire statements from the enemy regarding what he intends to do (his plan) then do not consider that you are dealing with intentions. You must then work only with enemy capabilities plus an assessment of what the SOB is probably up to. These are discussed later.

How are statements of intent by an opponent collected? The ways and means vary from the most sophisticated espionage operations all the way down the scale to the extraction of information from unclassified publications. Here are a few examples taken at random:

*Espionage*—In World War II, the Albanian valet of the British Ambassador to Turkey succeeded in cracking the Ambassador's private safe and had access to top secret British documents on the conduct of the war. He sold photographs of the documents to the Nazi government. Thus the Nazis had authentic statements of Allied *intentions* on a continuing basis. Fortunately, some of Hitler's experts in Berlin could never quite believe that this was not a British trick. For this and other, more complex reasons, the documents were never accepted by the German authorities as representing Allied intentions. The German covername for this operation was Cicero.<sup>5</sup>

*Radio intercept*—David Kahn in his fascinating book *The Codebreakers* describes how an unwitting U.S. military attache in Cairo helped to provide General Erwin Rommel with accurate and timely information on British plans in North Africa. His voluminous radio messages, addressed to the Military Intelligence Division, Washington, were intercepted by at least two Axis intercept stations, decrypted, and flashed to Rommel in North Africa within hours of the time that the attache released them. In Kahn's words, "And what messages they were: They provided Rommel with undoubtedly the broadest and clearest picture of enemy forces and intentions available to any Axis commander throughout the whole war."<sup>6</sup> Rommel knew how to react to good intelligence. His title "The Desert Fox" was well deserved.

**Surprise**

*Luck*—On 13 September 1862 Union forces under General George B. McClellan moved into Frederick, Md., which had just been evacuated by Confederate forces. A Union soldier found a copy of General Lee's Special Order No. 191 wrapped around a handful of cigars, obviously left behind by a departing Confederate. The Order revealed Lee's *plan* for his Maryland campaign. The consensus is that, even in the hands of the cautious McClellan, this statement of intent proved a decisive factor.<sup>7</sup>

*Prisoners and defectors*—In every war, PWs and defectors reveal the plans of their commands. These are statements of enemy *intent*, made by representatives of the enemy. If you fought in Vietnam you probably recall how much valuable information flowed from NVN/VC prisoners and defectors.

*Captured documents*—Countless times in South Vietnam, written operations *plans* were captured well in advance of the proposed NVN/VC operations. The operations did not always take place or did not take place on schedule and this tended to disillusion some of our commanders. In such instances, simply recall how many operations we plan and later change before implementation. We have no monopoly on changing our minds.

*Unclassified documents*—Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* was not taken seriously by most U.S. authorities in the 1930's, despite the fact that it outlined in his words *what he intended to do*. Our intelligence people apparently preferred to collect their own information and look into their own crystal balls. Lenin made the intentions of the Communist Party quite clear. I have never heard them repudiated.

From the few examples cited, one can see the wide range of possibilities for obtaining statements of intent from the mouth or pen of the opponent rather than from crystal-gazing on our part.

My advice is to listen carefully to your opponents. We have been surprised far more often by not listening than by listening. But whether or not he reveals his intentions, you can and must know his capabilities.

9. *Your immediate and continuing intelligence requirement is to know your opponent's capabilities.* Lacking knowledge of your opponent's intentions, you operate with limited vision; lacking knowledge of his capabilities, you are blind. Capabilities are derived essentially from two categories of information: location and strength (personnel and equipment). They are factual, not speculative. No attempt should be made by an intelligence officer to prioritize these into an order of "relative probability of adoption." He is only guessing at intentions if he does. The basic information which was lacking at Pearl Harbor was the location of the Japanese Task Force as it steamed toward Hawaii and its strength. Even though the commanders in Hawaii had convinced themselves that Pearl Harbor would not be attacked and even though Japanese intentions may have been unclear, had the commanders received a single sighting of a Japanese carrier task force (strength) located, for example, 100 nautical miles (location) from Hawaii, it is hard to believe that the disaster at Pearl Harbor would have occurred.

*Surprise*

Because location and strength are so essential, intelligence collection systems to be employed in a combat area should be designed primarily to gather this type of information—where is it? what is it?—and to report it rapidly. A detailed discussion of this entire subject is contained in Major General (Ret) Elias Carter Townsend's brilliant book *Risks: The Key to Combat Intelligence*,<sup>8</sup> which is recommended reading for every military professional.

10. *When you know enemy capabilities but not intentions, try to answer the question: "What does it appear the SOB is really up to?"* This is the type question that you should explore privately with your staff, with no holds barred. In addition to information on enemy location and strength used to determine capabilities, your intelligence officer should be able to produce other information which will help answer the question. Such information includes the other facets of Order of Battle (including logistic information), characteristics of the area (terrain, weather, and man-made facilities) as well as enemy tactics and patterns of activity. If the sum total of this factual information does not yield an answer to the question, issue new requirements. The total intelligence system will then go to work for you, often with surprising results.

11. *Share the wealth!* Competition between intelligence producers is healthy, if they are all working with the same sheet of music. It is only when such competition bottlenecks the flow of intelligence that a dangerous situation is created. One of the principal causes of our being surprised by the Germans in the Ardennes in December 1944 was the failure of various commands to pass intelligence quickly up and down the system and laterally. The various commands seemed to be competing with each other for possession of information and the privilege of interpreting it. Although the First U.S. Army was completely surprised by the attack, the Third U.S. Army to the south was not. General Patton, commanding the Third U.S. Army, foresaw the possibility of a major German offensive in the Ardennes (but underestimated its magnitude) as early as 9 December and planned for that eventuality, even though it was outside his area of immediate responsibility. Colonel (later Brigadier General) Oscar W. Koch, Patton's G-2, later said: "Abundant information was at hand to support the deductions we made (concerning the German attack) and the views expressed in the Patton headquarters from the time of the December 9 briefing at Nancy. History was to prove them entirely correct."<sup>9</sup> How could two armies, operating side-by-side, view the enemy situation so differently? One answer was that while they exchanged intelligence summaries and other reports, there could have been little exchange of views between the commanders and between their G-2's on this subject and little help from above. This intelligence fragmentation prevailed throughout the Allied Command. The VIII Corps, which bore the brunt of the German onslaught, received only some of the warning information picked up by its divisions. For example, on 15 December, the day before the attack, four PW's were captured by the 4th and 106th Divisions. All four claimed to have heard statements or rumors of an impending German attack between 16-25 December. The 106th Division reported the data about one PW immediately by message to the Corps, but not about the other PW, and the 4th Division reported neither of its two PW data. During the period just prior to the attack,

***Surprise***

a total of seven indications of attack warning were picked up by the 4th, 28th, and 106th Divisions of the VIII Corps. Only four of these, including the single PW statement, were forwarded to Corps. The Corps did not report any of these four electrically to First Army but did include them in its G-2 Periodic Report for the day, which probably arrived at First Army too late to be of use.<sup>10</sup> As late as 14 December, the war map of Major General Kenneth Strong, Eisenhower's intelligence officer, showed only four German divisions in front of the VIII Corps<sup>11</sup> rather than the actual twenty-eight.<sup>12</sup> It was clear that each command was "going it alone" in the intelligence business. General Strong said in his book *Intelligence at the Top*: "After the war I learned that many American divisional and front line commanders had received indications more definite than anything we had at Supreme Headquarters of what was brewing on the German side. For various reasons, such scraps of useful information never reached us."<sup>13</sup>

There was abundant information available in the combat zone. It simply was not passed around, and nowhere did it all come together. Commanders and their intelligence officers virtually "went it alone" with disastrous results. The lesson can be summed up: *Information of the enemy must move quickly and freely throughout the military structure, unrestricted by command channels.*

No commander is an island, particularly in the business of intelligence. He needs help, all he can get. Sharing the wealth will help future commanders avoid such shocks as the Bulge.

12. *Go first class in your intelligence shop.* Fight to get a good officer—preferably a Military Intelligence Branch officer—as your top intelligence staff officer. The greater your demands on the Intelligence Branch, the harder that branch will work to produce blue-chip personnel. The branch, though still young, has made remarkable progress since its formation in 1962 and its later designation as a Combat Support Branch. If you want to avoid being surprised—or, conversely, to achieve surprise against your opponent—you will need that blue-chip officer heading your intelligence shop. Not only will he put it all together for you, he will be your entree into the total intelligence system. Fight also to get good intelligence people throughout your organization. The lowest-ranking enlisted analyst might be the one to detect that important scrap of information which will alert you to danger. I have seen this happen many times.

13. *Expect any attempt to surprise you to occur at the worst time and place.* It was no accident that Pearl Harbor occurred in the early morning hours of Sunday 7 December 1941 . . . or that the 1973 Arab attack in the Mid-East was launched on Yom Kippur. In seeking to surprise you, your opponent will plan his operation at the time and place which he thinks you will least expect. Nothing mysterious about that approach. You would do the same to him. Yet we continue to be surprised during odd hours and at odd places. We need to keep open minds and to gear ourselves for *effective* 24-hour vigilance. This means, among other things, shoring up duty shifts with top-flight personnel and amply rewarding them for this less desirable duty; it means taking extra precautions to keep shift personnel informed; it means leadership

**Surprise**

of the highest order; it means having plans for adjusting quickly to increased levels of alert and, lastly, it means creating and maintaining the proper state of mind at every level throughout our defense system. The price of freedom is indeed eternal vigilance.

14. *Recognize that warning signals will often be buried in piles of conflicting and irrelevant information.* If you have adapted to the previous 13 suggestions, you and your blue-chip intelligence people will generally be able to cope with this problem. In each of the cited examples of surprise, there were numerous conflicting or misleading indicators which threw intelligence analysts and decision makers off the track. This will always be a problem. Your opponent radiates such indications both intentionally and unintentionally. You must cope with these confusion factors as well as with the sheer volume of irrelevant information flowing in our system.

David Kahn in *The Codebreakers*, using Pearl Harbor as an example, describes this problem realistically and sympathetically: "After the fact, of course, the true portents stand out in high relief, whereas the others, unneeded and therefore forgotten, recede into the background. The revisionists, looking back with the 20-20 vision of hindsight, select the true indications and disregard all others, thus making it appear as if even a deaf and blind idiot could have seen Pearl Harbor coming. But it was not like that for those who were there." <sup>14</sup>

If you follow the above fourteen suggestions, I cannot guarantee that you will never be surprised. I can only guarantee that you will minimize the odds. And what more could a commander ask for?

*Surprise*

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